



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

PENOLOGY AND ATONEMENT

REV. JAMES E. GREGG

Pittsfield, Massachusetts

The more we study theology the more we see that it is transcendentalized politics. We extend into the field of religion the practices to which we have become accustomed outside of religion. These practices we are very apt to take as self-evident truth, and we are sometimes surprised when we are shown what they really are. Here as in so many other places a refusal to think conventionally is at first sight rather startling. Yet facts are facts whether we have seen them or not.

A minister of the younger generation, in choosing the hymns which his congregation shall sing, is likely quite regularly to omit certain verses of favorite hymns, and certain other hymns altogether. If he analyzes the material which he thus habitually seeks to exclude from the worshiping minds of his people, he will be likely to find that most of it refers to the blood of Christ, shed for the remission of our sins. Somehow or other a great many of us nowadays cannot sing with glad conviction and whole-hearted sincerity

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me;

or

Jesus my Shepherd is,
'Twas He that loved my soul,
'Twas He that washed me in His blood,
'Twas He that made me whole;
And His the blood that can for all atone,
And set me faultless there before the throne;

or

Let the water and the blood
From Thy wounded side that flows,
Be of sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure.

William Cowper's hymn beginning:

There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins:
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.

is said to have been repeated with intense satisfaction by Daniel Webster on his deathbed; but it does not now appeal either to the taste or to the intelligence of thoughtful Christians.

This growing aversion to the old-fashioned phraseology of the atonement is not due only to the fact that the symbol of blood is offensive to our sensibilities—connoting to us death, whereas to the Hebrews it connoted life. It is also due to the fact that the traditional theories of the atonement are more and more felt to be superstitious, heathenish,¹ unreal, repellent, incredible. To begin with the earliest of these theories, we cannot accept the notion that Christ's death was a ransom paid by God to Satan, who otherwise would have continued to hold the whole human race under his power. Almost all the Fathers of the early church, from Irenaeus down to Gregory the Great, took delight in

¹ Cf. R. M. Jones, *The Double Search*, p. 59.

expounding this theory, setting forth the bargain as a divine snare, by which Satan was cheated: for he proved not strong enough to hold the Son of God in hell. Gregory of Nyssa declares that "like a skilful fisherman, God veiled the divine nature of his Son beneath human flesh, in order to catch Satan by the hook of his divinity. The latter, like a greedy fish, swallowed both bait and hook."¹

Anselm's view, that man owes to God a perfect obedience, and that in sinning against the infinite Being he incurs an infinite debt, which only a God-man can pay, and which Christ accordingly has paid for us all—this "commercial" explanation suited the mind of the Middle Ages, and is still reflected in many of the phrases of hymns and sermons. But it is really derived from two feudal ideas: first, the honor which is owed to one's suzerain; secondly, the necessity of either punishment or satisfaction for every offense;² and it leads logically into antinomianism. For if all that men owe to God has been paid by Christ, they owe him nothing more, and may do as they please henceforth.³

Nor is the "governmental" theory, first elaborated by Grotius, much more reasonable to our minds. According to this view, Christ suffered as an example, to vindicate and uphold the majesty of the divine law, which demanded that some punishment should be inflicted upon some one for the trans-

gressions of humanity. Christ's death is not thought of as a compensation, or as a substitution, or as a satisfaction, but simply as a demonstration of divine justice. Yet, one instinctively asks, what kind of justice is it which is exemplified and glorified by the punishment of an innocent victim? Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? And is this right?

The slightly modernized statement of the Calvinistic view⁴ by one of the chief exponents of Princeton theology, Dr. Charles Hodge, may be next cited:

Human sovereigns pardon criminals; earthly parents forgive their children. If the penalty of the law could be as easily remitted in the divine government, then it would not follow from the fact that all men are sinners that they cannot be forgiven on the ground of their repentance and reformation. The Scriptures, however, assume that if a man sins he must die. On this assumption all their representations and arguments are founded. Hence the plan of salvation which the Bible reveals supposes that the justice of God which renders the punishment of sin necessary has been satisfied. Men can be pardoned and restored to the favor of God, because Christ was set forth as an expiation for their sins, through faith in his blood; because he was made a curse for us; because he died, the just for the unjust, because he bore our sins in his own body on the tree; and because the penalty due to us was laid on him. It is clear, therefore, that the Scriptures recognize the truth that God is just, in the sense that he is determined by his

¹ *Or. catech.*, 24, quoted by A. Sabatier, *The Doctrine of the Atonement*, English translation, pp. 66, 145.

² A. Sabatier, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

³ B. P. Bowne, *Studies in Christianity*, p. 118.

⁴ On the whole, it seems fair to say that the Protestant reformers rested their theories of the atonement upon Anselm's, though they emphasized the idea of punishment rather than that of satisfaction.

moral excellence to punish all sin, and, therefore, that the satisfaction of Christ which secures the pardon of sinners is rendered to the justice of God. Its primary and principal design is neither to make a moral impression upon the offenders themselves, nor to operate didactically on other intelligent creatures, but to satisfy the demands of justice.¹

As Dr. Hodge elsewhere remarks, "everything depends on what is meant by justice. If (as Leibnitz declared) justice is 'benevolence guided by wisdom' . . . the work of Christ . . . may be simply a means of reformation, or of moral impression. . . ." But if we are to think of the justice of God as being "vindicatory," i.e., as rewarding goodness and punishing wickedness purely because of their inherent merit or demerit, "then the work of Christ must be a satisfaction of justice in that sense of the term."²

We are here in sight of the inmost knot of the whole tangled problem. Everything does depend on what you mean by justice. If you hold that all evil-doing must be rewarded by the infliction of a supposedly appropriate amount of suffering, without regard either to the past or to the future, then you may be able to believe that God is just in requiring the crucifixion of his innocent Son as an expiation of the sin of the world. But the reason why most of us find this theory of the atonement

incredible and horrible is that we do not accept either the idea of justice or the idea of God which it presupposes.

We start out in all our religious thinking today with the words "Our Father." Whatever else God may or may not be, we are sure that he is somehow *that*. Consequently we find it easy to believe that it was because he so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever should believe on him might not perish, but have eternal life. Consequently, again, we recognize in the parable of the Prodigal Son a true picture of God's way with men. If certain verses from the Epistle to the Romans are quoted as contradicting the teaching of this parable, and we are told that we must choose between St. Paul and Christ, we shall not hesitate which master to follow. But we shall have a strong feeling that such a conflict of authorities is apparent rather than real; that St. Paul was simply speaking in the figures which were most familiar and expressive to him. He was a Jew, and consequently the altar-ritual was to him brimful of divine meaning, as it cannot be to you and to me.³

Furthermore, whether we realize it or not, most of us have thrown overboard the pagan notion that justice is properly retributive, or, as Dr. Hodge calls it, vindicatory. Both of these are more

¹ *Sys. Theol.*, II, 492 f.

² *Op. cit.*, II, 490.

³ "There is no doubt that the Hebrew people, whose religion was so intensely objective, held it in a manner of literality that involved real misconception. They saw nothing in it but the altars, priests, confessions, sprinklings, and smoking fires; and these they called their atonement, or the covering of their sin, as if there were some outward moment in the things themselves—taken outwardly these were the religion. But meantime there was a power in these . . . and the outward moment of the rite, which was a fiction, had yet an inward moment correspondent thereto, which made the fiction truthful."—Bushnell, *God in Christ*, p. 252.

respectable looking words than the word revengeful; but that is what they mean—nothing more, nothing less. Vengeance may be exacted by an individual man, or by the state, or, as has been supposed, by an angry God. But it is the same barbarous motive in each case—"an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." It was permitted to the ancient Hebrews by Moses because of the hardness of their hearts; but it was swept away by Christ. His law is the law of love.¹

The whole progress of penology throughout the Christian era has been in the direction pointed out by our Lord. Dr. Frederick H. Wines distinguishes four stages in the evolution of the criminal law: (1) vengeance or retribution; (2) repression; (3) reformation or rehabilitation; (4) prevention. He shows that "retaliation, at first a private right, became, in the lapse of time, a public duty."² In early times "the fundamental principle of morality is reciprocity. . . . The primitive man could not see why if we are to return benefits we are not to return injuries upon the same basis of give and take. Accordingly, the instinct of retaliation is one of the deepest instincts in human nature; it survives even in the civilized man."³

Now this ancient and essentially barbarous and un-Christian idea of punishment as retribution or revenge has persisted, amazing as it seems, through the whole development of Christian doctrine down to comparatively recent times. Dr. Hodge seems as full of it as Augustine or Aquinas. He

affirms without hesitation that neither the reformation of the offender nor the prevention of crime is the primary end of punishment. If this were so, justice, he says, would be merged into benevolence.⁴

Once again Dr. Hodge is right. Since we have now learned—and, thanks to Mr. Thomas Mott Osborne, are having the lesson impressed upon our minds with a new vividness—that the chief ends of punishment *are* the reformation of the wrongdoer and the prevention of further wrongdoing, we are able to see, more clearly than ever, that justice and kindness *do* coalesce as each rises into perfection. They lose their separateness and cease to contradict each other as they are taken up and transformed into love. This would seem to be the meaning of the strange parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, in which the lord of the vineyard pays those who have worked but one hour the same wage as those who have toiled from early morning and have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. It seems unfair, and we sympathize with the tired men who protest. But the teaching of the story points to God's justice, which discerns motives and intentions, which can value the will for the deed, and is therefore able to be compassionate and kind.

In our modern courts and prisons we are slowly but surely working toward this ideal of a justice which is also merciful, and is consummated in love. The probation system, the indeterminate sentence, and the juvenile court are all illustrations of the new penology, which

¹ Cf. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 68 f.

² *Punishment and Reformation*, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, I, 417-19.

seeks neither the death nor the misery of the sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live; which looks hopefully toward the future, and considers with painstaking care what is best for the wrongdoer and what is best for the community, and not at all how much suffering should be inflicted to balance in some sense the harm which the misdeed has caused. Revenge, even in the name of justice, is not thought of. Yet severity is frequently necessary—frequently the kindest treatment that can be given. Just as we are disgusted with a father who spoils his children, by disregarding or lightly excusing their misdemeanors, so we are disgusted with a judge who acts as if the new justice meant good-natured indulgence of evil. Rather it means such an utter intolerance of evil that it is unwilling to release an offender until he is cured, made over, changed into a decent, upright, trustworthy member of society.

The orthodox theologians of the church, we remember, once clung tightly to an obsolete cosmology. But Copernicus and Galileo made them let go—after a while. Many of them are still clinging nowadays to an obsolete penology, a conception of God's justice which is inhuman, and therefore incredible.¹ Once the human mind lets go the delusion that justice and mercy are in conflict, all the time-worn fallacies about the atonement—the ransom theory, the

debt theory, the governmental theory, and all that belongs with them—will come tumbling down in ruins, and will settle quietly into one more of the many theological rubbish-heaps which are among the way-marks of the progress of Christianity.

But what will be left? What theory can we count upon to stand firm? Quite clearly, as it would seem, the ethical theory of the atonement is the one for the future. Sometimes it has been spoken of as "the moral-influence" theory, and often with a disparaging suggestion of weakness. But this is unjust. To hold that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself because of his love, and through the sacrifice of the cross, has nothing enervating about it. As Bushnell said, "A first consideration in the restoration of man is that he be made to see the iron substructure of eternal government jutting up around him and hear it reverberating under his feet."² But there is nothing sterner than the tragedy of self-sacrificing love.

Indeed, as August Sabatier has eloquently shown, the call to accept an atonement which is spiritual, and not commercial or legal, is the same high summons which the prophets have voiced through all the ages. The priests have set forth ritual and sacrament and institutional order as the symbols of duty. These have their undeniable place and value. But the weightier matters of the law are something else.

¹ Yet Clement of Alexandria discerningly said: "Men ask how God can be good and kind if he is angry and punishes? They should remember that punishment is for the good of the offender and for the prevention of evil."—*Paed.* I, viii. Quoted by Hodge, *op. cit.*, I, 419.

"Plato held that the proper end of punishment is not merely to render to the guilty their due, but at the same time to make them better."—Wines, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

² *Christ in Theology*, p. 236.

God's forgiveness requires a humble and contrite heart.

What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices, saith the Lord: I have had enough of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts. . . . Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me. . . . Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

All the other prophets gave expression to protests like Isaiah's; "all denied the religious and moral value of sacrifices, all absolutely rejected their objective efficacy for atonement."¹

It is immediately evident that the teaching of our Lord follows out this same line of truth. He speaks of his death as "a ransom," to be sure, but this is merely a traditional Jewish picture-word, no more to be taken literally than our word "self-sacrifice," which suggests to no one the burning of one's body on an altar. The whole spirit of our Lord's words and deeds plainly proves to us that he thought of God's forgiveness as conditioned only by the repentance and faith of the sinner. No satisfaction, oblation, propitiation, or expiation of any sort is required of the Prodigal Son; and that parable has always been rightly regarded as the heart of the Gospel. God does not need to be reconciled to man; man needs to be reconciled to God. "God's external

treatment of us no doubt may change with changes in ourselves. But we need to insist that his inner mind, the principle on which his treatment of us is based, never changes. That principle is always Love, and Love only."²

Since God's love, like the wisest and truest human love that we know, is strong and firm and utterly uncompromising toward evil, we can understand that his forgiveness does not remove the natural penalties of sin. The reformed drunkard is handicapped for the rest of his days by a weakened body; the converted gambler sees his children growing up without the education which they deserve, because his vice has kept them in poverty. Forgiveness is a personal and spiritual reconciliation; it cannot blot out the past, or the physical consequences of the past. But it does bring the soul back into light and joy and freedom and peace.

The crowning wonder of God's love is its revelation in Christ. His incarnation and his atonement are parts of the same whole. God is with us at Bethlehem and on Calvary. But the distinctive meaning of the cross is that God's love was and is ever ready even to suffer on our behalf, that we may be drawn back to Him. That is why the self-sacrifice of Christ, beyond every other martyrdom, beyond every other heroic death, beyond every other deed of loyal devotion, is mighty to lift men out of their sins and to lead them into eternal life.

¹ A. Sabatier, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

² W. H. Moberly, *Foundations*, p. 305.